Education and Nonviolence in the work of Aldo Capitini

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L’articolo tratta della teoria della nonviolenza di Aldo Capitini (1899-1968) evidenziandone le valenze pedagogiche. Negli ultimi anni, diverse ricerche hanno mostrato come molti aspetti della proposta di Aldo Capitini rappresentino rilevanti suggestioni nella società contemporanea. In particolare, l’articolo approfondisce i temi dell’apertura culturale come intima esigenza connaturata all’educazione, la “nonviolenza” come strumento di contrasto non solo della dimensione esplicita ma anche di quella “epistemica” della violenza, propria delle posizioni dominanti, l’educazione alla pace come orientamento che chiede in causa una responsabilità diffusa e la prospettiva dell’”omnicrazia” (potere di tutti), come obiettivo educativo irrinunciabile per lo sviluppo di un’ampia partecipazione sociale e di una cittadinanza inclusiva.

Tutti i diritti riservati.
perspective aimed at the mere absence of violence is inadequate, as it does not explain how building the cultural bases against the dynamics of violence.

In this regard, it must be remembered that the demand for a revision of the culture of violence has deep pedagogical roots in Italy. Rediscovering that claim in some pedagogical reflections – among them the pedagogical suggestions formulated by Aldo Capitini (1899-1968), the most important Italian theorist of nonviolence – could contribute to firmer bases for this perspective, related to a plan for society and an associated conception of education functional to it.

Capitini’s pedagogical theory is not well known outside Italy and is not commonly studied in Italy. Nevertheless, after a long period of relative lack of obscurity, the pedagogical dimension of Aldo Capitini’s thought has, in recent years, been analysed in an increasing number of studies and conferences (Gobbo, 1983; Pironi, 1991; Foppa Pedretti, 2005, 2008; Pomi, 2005; Catarci, 2007; Giacché, 2008; Falcicchio, 2009; Salmeri, 2011). These highlight the possibilities for finding in this pedagogical theory useful educational answers to contemporary social needs.

Indeed, most researchers have connected current pedagogical issues, like the challenges for peace, interculturalism, or social inclusion (Gundara, 2000; Banks, 2001; Harrison & Morrison, 2013), with Capitini’s intuitions. Rediscovering a firm foundation in a rigorous human and social development project, which includes the perspective of nonviolence, these studies have demonstrated that Aldo Capitini’s ideas have widely contributed to the development of pedagogical studies in Italy. After presenting a brief biographical outline, the present article will focus on his proposals for an “open education”, aimed at allowing the acquisition of “cultural openness”; nonviolence, intended both as strategy for social change and as a struggle against “epistemic violence” by dominant cultural groups; on peace education, which requires widespread responsibility; and finally on the idea of “omnicracy” (power of everybody), to ensure the development of wide social participation and of an inclusive citizenship.

2. LIFE OF A DISSIDENT: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE OF ALDO CAPITINI

Aldo Capitini was born into a humble family in Perugia, the centre of Italy, in 1899. Since 1924, during his university studies supported by a scholarship at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, he strongly opposed fascism, organising assemblies and meetings among students.

After finishing a degree in literature in 1928 and a period of employment as a secretary at the Scuola Normale Superiore, he refused to join the fascist party in 1933, consequently losing his job.

After that, he began to travel throughout Italy, spreading Gandhi’s non-violent methods and “antifascism among young people” (Capitini, 1966). Because of his educational and political activity, he was imprisoned twice, in 1942
and in 1943. In post-Second World War Italy, Capitini set up an intensive educational program throughout a country torn apart by poverty, in a political context profoundly affected by the international polarisation that divided the world into two opposing blocks. In this political climate he instituted, at first in Perugia and then in many other cities in Italy, social guidance centres: assemblies where people freely discussed cultural topics and current affairs, with the aim of learning and practicing what Capitini calls “omnicracy”, a responsible and active citizenship practiced by everyone.

In 1956 he became a full professor of pedagogy at Cagliari University, and in 1959 founded the Defence and Development of Italian State School Association, in order to preserve the principles of equal rights and popular participation in education. Later, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1961, he promoted the first Perugia-Assisi March for Peace and Brotherhood Among People, which still takes place to this very day. For the first time in Italy, the march collected together intellectuals, artists and peace activists under the slogan “peace needs to be prepared during peace”. During this period, he also encountered several important developments in popular education, educational experiments aimed at guaranteeing equal opportunities for every social group. Among them was the school of Barbiana, set up by Father Lorenzo Milani, where eight students wrote one of the most powerful indictments of the social inequalities of the Italian school system, “Letter to a Teacher” (Cambi, 2003: 324-325; Chiosso, 2009: 138-139). During the sixties he worked for a free and non-dogmatic religious approach, for a conscientious objection law, and for peace education. His constant promotion of the necessity for religious-based reform led him to strike with the Roman Catholic Church, which in 1956 had even condemned his manuscript “Open Religion” (Capitini, 1955), including it in a list of prohibited books. Persuaded of the need for a wide base of civic participation, he acted always through “centres” and groups, with an educational approach aimed at supporting citizen participation in political and social debates, yet never became a member of any political party: he defined himself a “left wing independent” and “free religious”. He went on promoting several cultural and educational initiatives on nonviolence, disarmament, Occident-Orient relationships, until he died in 1968 (Capitini, 1968a).

3. CULTURAL OPENNESS AS DEMAND FOR CURRENT EDUCATION

One of Capitini’s most relevant intuitions, which anticipates the specific claims for social inclusion in current society, can be identified in his reflections on “openness” in education.

In Capitini’s framework, the notion of “openness” stands for comprehension and empathy towards everyone, which therefore becomes a fundamental educational principle opposing authoritarianism and violence. In this sense, “open ed-
ucation” refers to an educational process with the capacity to make people aware of what Capitini calls “everybody’s reality”: “it is necessary”, Capitini says, “to use the term everybody with the same reverence used for God. Openness to everybody must be cultivated day by day, so as to create a simple reference point and a habit”* (Capitini, 1959: 2).

Further, openness means “including others and possibly everyone, allowing free development, movement and, much more than in the past, providing approaches and links towards others”* (Capitini, 1956: 23). Such inclusion is not only theoretical, but represents a practical orientation and an educational action, because “it is not possible to forgo the question of others”* (ibid.: 14-17).

Nowadays, the proposal of “open education” invites us, for instance, to take the chance of learning dialogue by practicing it day by day in multicultural schools: “I wish everyone”, Capitini says in a suggestive passage, “could attend schools with classmates of different ideological, religious and political backgrounds: an ideological, uniform and closed school can more easily lead to hostility and war, because it educates to consider differences intolerable, to be removed in the name of a learned ideology”* (Capitini, 1967a: 295). According to Capitini, a culturally and socially heterogeneous school is therefore an immense resource and an indefeasible opportunity to build a culture of “nonviolence”; a culture able to prepare, develop and defend “nonviolence”. Furthermore, as according to Capitini “openness” can be achieved through the inclusion of and free development for everyone, this perspective anticipates and involves a conscious focus on interculturalism aimed not only at improving the educational inclusion of minorities students but at developing the skills of open relations and social inclusion among students.

However, understanding of difference requires a school in which the spirit of dialogue can be learned every day. That is why openness should involve specific practices and an intentional planning of them. Education’s role is precisely to make up such shared values, departing from the notion of a ruling knowledge, and to link different cultural backgrounds.

4. FOSTERING A CULTURE OF NONVIOLENCE

When the first edition of Gandhi’s autobiography was published in Italy, in 1931, Capitini read and spread it, focusing on the ethics of nonviolence founded on an “open religion”, without institutional affiliations. Thus, Capitini reasserted Gandhi’s theoretical view, overcoming ethnocentric connotations. Furthermore, Capitini noticed straightway that Gandhi was a real educator, as his action was referred to within a general conception of education, aimed at producing a new politics.

Capitini draws on the concept of nonviolence as a methodology for action expressing resistance to oppression as well as a response to the spiral of violence.
Therefore, “active nonviolence” is made up not only of a personal commitment but also of a project for social change. That is why a strategy for nonviolence must be fully “active”, in order to replace violent means with nonviolent ones (Capitini, 1967b).

Nonviolence – and Gandhi himself proved it – is a cultural synthesis of Orient and Occident and, therefore, a fundamental means for cultural conflict management. Consequently, Orient and Occident must join themselves through nonviolence (Capitini, 1956: 7), a method of both educational and social reform.

Combining the two elements of society’s critique and the building of a new reality, education is an instrument for transforming society without violence. In fact, by writing “nonviolence” without a hyphen, Capitini envisages not only a simple absence of violence, but rather, positively, the praxis of transforming society.

Furthermore, Capitini deconstructs two biases towards nonviolence. The first one considers it ineffective and passive, yet, as the history of the Indian liberation struggle points out, nonviolence is first and foremost a fighting instrument, because it does not accept oppression, exploitation or overbearing powers. The second bias considers nonviolence a praxis of isolated singles, yet it is a collective method of transforming society, joining people and developing a wide action of awakening consciences through education. Thus, while violence is the weapon of oppressors, nonviolence strikes at the root of such oppression, changing reality and people’s consciences.

Moreover, in his reflection Capitini joins the perspective of nonviolence and the issues of education using the pedagogical term “methods”. In fact the expression “nonviolence’s methods” defines a whole range of pedagogical theories and educational praxes, rising up from dissatisfaction with the current society (Capitini, 1967b).

As a result, Capitini turns Gandhi’s nonviolence theory into both a social renovation method and an educational instrument of citizenship, particularly effective in his antifascist struggle. Opposite to the realist description of violence as inevitable, nonviolence is an ethical call for a civil engagement. In this perspective, the non-violent approach does not hide conflicts, but, on the contrary, in some sense it highlights them. In fact, while acting without the oppression or destruction of every living being, and especially of human beings, nonviolence requires us to deal with conflicts for a social change. It is, above all, a practical, ethical, political and educational orientation (Capitini, 1962: 29).

As a transformative perspective, mainly directed towards a change of unfair political and social structures, nonviolence does not result from people’s dispositions. It is not in human nature to be violent or non-violent: on the contrary, violence and nonviolence are cultural orientations. Therefore, Capitini remarks that we must enquire how to build a non-violent and open mind through education.
According to Capitini, all educational processes in school and society should be non-violent. Because our ways of managing conflicts in society are often characterised by violence, it is important to understand also how education could sometimes justify violence. In fact, even though it has detailed explanations concerning economic and political situations, violence takes root in a related “violence culture”. Therefore, an education capable of building the bases for an alternative “nonviolence culture” is indispensable.

In this sense, it is possible to find in Capitini’s thought the legacy of Antonio Gramsci’s crucial concept of “cultural hegemony”, which detects the permeation of a system of values, beliefs and attitudes throughout the whole society in support of the status quo. Such a notion draws attention also to the relevance of the role of pervasive forms of ideology in perpetuating repressive structures, and subsequently to the fact that prevailing cultural norms should not be considered “natural” or “inevitable”, but changeable through an effort of critical awareness.

Increasingly, arguing for the inclusion of all different cultural and social sources in changing of reality, the suggestions provided by Capitini seem relevant for the current challenges in our society. Translating it from theory into practice, these proposals demand the cultivation of dialogue day by day, through an educational engagement of nonviolence.

Despite the fact that the scenery is quite different from that of post-war Italy, the nature of cultural and social needs calls for the same critical awareness of the dynamics of violence underlined by Capitini. Such an educational effort must refer, for instance, to the “systemic violence” which assigns to 89% of the global population only 12% of the world’s resources. Any educational engagement must arise from this state of things, joining the building of links between cultures with the advocacy of social justice.

5. PEACE AND EDUCATION

In his reflections, Capitini explains that since education involves a preparation to participate in a responsible and active way in the life of society, it is necessary to include an educational effort for peace, which pertains not only to governments, but also requires the wide commitment of everybody in society.

In fact, peace and education are closely joint: peace cannot be built up solely by refusing to co-operate in war, but also necessitates day by day progress through an “open education”, “ridding schools of authoritarian mentality, in its cultural topics and its didactic and community methods, and founding dialogue and deep cooperation”* (Capitini, 1967a: 34).

Moreover, in this perspective war is unacceptable, because its aims are diametrically opposed to those of education. Indeed, instead of improving openness and comprehension among human beings, war causes a firm closure against others. If, as suggested by George Orwell in Nineteen Eighty-Four, the constant state
of war keeps the existing structures of society intact (Orwell, 1949: 160), then peace education becomes an instrument of social change.

According to Capitini, while an authoritarian society needs a simple education that teaches citizens to “obey” the status quo, an effective democratic society requires a large and dynamic educational engagement, which results in a non-violent approach in schools and in a number of social centres of adult education. In this sense, peace education can contribute to the eradication of “teaching of obedience” in favour of principles and values of nonviolence, openness, dialogue, and the development of every human being.

To translate this perspective into practice, the school must be characterised, first and foremost, by an opening to the wider community, contrasting the situation of the school victims of nationalism.

As the relationship between education and peace cannot be built simply by replacing nationalistic issues with content related to peace, a global rethinking of education, with its methods and approaches, must be taken into account. According to Capitini, this includes a number of initiatives, such as “healing” school texts and curricula from their nationalist and imperialist rhetoric; educating through the dissemination of different contents, rediscovering cooperative efforts, the heroes of peace, and the instruments and institutions that have arisen from the strategy of peace in the history of the world; organising the school as a community, allowing the student to practice responsible citizenship in their everyday life; transforming the ways in which some subjects, including religion, are taught in conversations between the teacher and students, to educate the discussion and develop critical thinking; and connecting in every activity the national to the international context.

In this way, the “horizon of everybody”, as Capitini describes it, can be kept in mind as a reference point, as education contributes to the formation of a pacifist mindset.

6. EDUCATING TO “OMNICRACY” FOR AN ACTIVE AND INCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP

Ensuring the participation of different social and cultural groups in society requires educational engagement, developing the skills of an inclusive citizenship, which Capitini calls “omnicracy” (power of everybody). In fact, according to him, advocacy of rights cannot be detached from educating people to the level of active political participation in each space of society.

This proposal of citizenship participation from the bottom up arises from the real circumstances of the lives, work and culture of people. Education therefore offers a political and social laboratory, promoting experiences of proximity and of participative democracy. To pursue this perspective, a wide network of citizen participation spaces must be arranged: local councils, school-family committees, social centres, long life education centres, and discussion meetings.
“Omnicracy” rises up at the community level, the result of constant involvement from the bottom up. That is why, according to Capitini, schools must educate to political participation on a daily basis, through activities such as: organisation of the school as a community; school initiatives that benefit the surrounding society; student visits to bodies, institutes, associations, and assemblies to gain an understanding of their value and function; working in cooperative groups; dialogic activities, debates and class discussions; student exchanges; reviews of programs; and integration of the curriculum with conflict management strategies (Capitini, 1968b: 258-259).

Capitini experiences this in his social guidance centres, first created in 1944 and sprouting up thereafter in several municipalities in north-central Italy. The purpose of these centres is to educate people - especially the youth - through free assemblies that allow participants to express their opinion publicly on cultural and daily topics and to contribute to the political and civic debate (Capitini, 1967a: 255).

Capitini’s deep intuitions and anticipations could allow current society to build up a new inclusive citizenship principle through education, thus challenging the marginalisation of cultural values and viewpoints of non-dominant groups in the global society. Indeed, the perspective of “omnicracy” entails a critical viewpoint and an increase in participation of non-dominant cultural groups as well as an equal and fair production of knowledge. Hence, it could support and defend open and pluralist democracies.

7. CONCLUSION

Many of the questions addressed by Capitini remain crucial in our time, as they are related to old and new educational emergencies. In particular, his work speaks to the formulation of theories on education in a context of social and cultural inclusion; to the development of an educational approach that faces the acquisition of a critical awareness of violence dynamics in a modern multicultural democracy; to the role of culture and education in maintaining such dynamics; and finally, to the creation of a character of social renewal in educational praxes.

By identifying in Capitini’s work the roots of current educational efforts towards an inclusive society, we could produce a remarkable contribution to the pursuit, through education, of a fundamentally transformative paradigm that addresses the forms and structures of social exclusion and injustice.

Whenever social and economic habits become obstacles to fundamental values, such as the protection and promotion of human rights, defence of human dignity, and the cultivation of economic and social equality, a “prophetic educator” educates to social change.

Indeed, in Capitini’s thought, the principle of social change is closely connected with that of “prophecy”. If education represents a fundamental instru-
ment of transformation, the educator must be a “prophet” of a new reality, encouraging “openness” towards the future.

This entails a vertical dimension of reflection characterising education, aimed at stimulating a critical analysis of the present and “openness” towards the future, underpinned by values antithetical to orthodoxy.

Facing this challenge requires a preliminary deep analysis of the representations conveyed by educational subjects and of the role of culture in maintaining inequalities in society. Hence, education must build up an approach apt to think and understand how education can transmit an ideology beneficial to the basic interests of a “dominant position”. In fact, as Althusser in a well-known essay claims, the risk is that the whole education system transmits the ruling class ideology as “ideological state apparatus” (Althusser, 1970).

Thus, Capitini's suggestions contribute to the forging of a meaning of inclusive education aimed not only at promoting processes of social cohesion, but also at endorsing an active social justice through the building of the conditions of equal opportunity for subaltern social groups. In pursuing this key objective, as Capitini points out, a paramount role is played by the development of critical awareness of the dynamics of violence in society and of their part in maintaining the status quo.

Moreover, Capitini’s suggestions can help us to recall in the Italian context the climate in which the Constitution of the Italian Republic arose, thus revitalising efforts for an education that assure equal opportunities for different social groups. In fact, in post-Second World War Italy, the Constitution of the Italian Republic defines a principle and a cultural project of “openness” in education, stating in Article 34 that “schools are open to everyone”, which guarantees schooling to students from different origins irrespective of nationality, cultural origin or even condition of juridical regularity. Recognising education as a fundamental right, this constitutional principle, to which Capitini refers, is a fundamental juridical basis for inclusive education in Italy presently. As one of the fathers of the Italian Constitution, Piero Calamandrei, explains, Article 34 of the Italian Constitution makes the school an “instrument of civic equality, of respecting faith freedom and different points of view”* (Calamandrei, 1950: 90).

In conclusion, Capitini’s pedagogical theory contributes to the rediscovery of the “social role” of education: creating new politics and society, through the critical building of cultural, moral and political conditions of transformation. Education may actually produce a nonviolent change of reality, through an activity of developing “knowledge for changing” “knowing the world”, Capitini says, “is related to the will to change it”* (Capitini, 1967a: 13). That requires the development of a wide perspective of long life learning aimed at a new citizenship consciousness and a purposeful involvement of citizens in society. Education therefore becomes an approach that prefigures the reversal of unfair economic, political and social orders: through a personal commitment to the issues of non-
violence, for an inclusive state school, and for peace. The figure of Aldo Capitini shows up also nowadays in the “precious strength of small groups”, which resides in the “immaterial” resources activated by groups of people and communities analysing the surrounding reality, recognising needs and mobilising for social change (Capitini, 1969: 444). In this context, education must be adapted to continuously build the critical conditions to regard violence as simply “intolerable”.

NOTES

* Translation by the author.

REFERENCES


